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Pathways of Reflection: Creating Voice Through Life Story and Dialogical Poetry

Lynn Norton

Key words: critical
reflexivity; life
stories; dialogical
poetry; heuristic
inquiry; agency;
voice; lifelong
learning

Abstract: In this article, I explore pathways towards critical reflexivity as a way of understanding the interaction between personal and professional development. How much do we, and can we, put our personal lives into our work? Reflexivity can be developed through various methods but is explored herein through life stories and dialogical poetry as ways of deepening the connection between personal discourses and professional lives. A heuristic inquiry framework developed by Clark MOUSTAKAS is used together with poetry and dialogue to map a personal exploration of reflexivity through life story work. The journey follows six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination in a creative synthesis. Acknowledging that reflexivity is viewed as occurring in context, a narrative lens is used to integrate the importance of working with lived experience while recognizing how we are influenced by our past and present social interaction with others. In this way, as researchers and professionals, we are better able to position ourselves, to better understand the context in which we work, and to develop a more ethical lens through which we view our reality. The scope for personal agency and the creation of voice is explored through these interactions.

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1. Introduction

As a PhD student, I start my research journey by critically reflecting on who I am and how I position myself in relation to others, my context and my research. Questions emerge as I explore my own life story and I wonder from the outset: Does my story really matter? Does my race, culture, gender, the language I speak, place of origin, or age matter? Does it matter whether I am short or tall, overweight or thin, healthy or ill, whether I was bullied at school or was the bully, or who I love? Do these things matter more in certain contexts? Does race matter more, for example, because I am a white, heterosexual, middle-aged South African woman who grew up in privilege, within a context of a long history of apartheid and inequality? [1]

I think strongly that these things do matter (*not* because I think the categories themselves are important or are true representations of reality) but because I think context is complex and my view of the world has been shaped over time through the social, cultural and political environments in which I grew up. It has been shaped by my parents' teachings, big family gatherings, sugar cane landscapes, white privilege within a hostile and unfair political climate, marriage and motherhood, life and death. My life has been shaped through the interaction of the now many relationships formed and experiences I had while developing my ideas, through schools and university, working in the corporate world and in community settings. As CUNLIFFE (2008) asserts, "We are who we are because everything we say, think and do is interwoven with particular and generalized others: generalized groups, categories, language systems, culturally and historically situated discursive and non-discursive practices" (p.129). This process of "shaping" continues in my daily life. I bring into my research my whole story and, in turn, each of the research participants I meet (and all their stories) shifts my perceptions as we interact together. [2]

If I can become more aware of the biases I bring and render these visible, I can pursue a more ethical research path. The process I follow can be helpful for researchers in similar positions. GONZALEZ (2003) explicates four ethics for engaging in postcolonial ethnography, which have been applied also to autoethnography: accountability, context, community and truthfulness. In relation to truthfulness she calls for a radical openness to "see not only what is in one's social and environmental context, to see not only what one has actually done or said, but also to see that which is on the surface not visible" (in PATHAK, 2010, p.8). The purpose of this article is not to tell you my lived experience but to reveal any advantages (or disadvantages) of following a deeply reflexive process that challenges my own perceptions of reality, of how I see things. By exploring my own story, I set out to track pathways towards critical reflexivity as a means of enriching my understanding of my personal and professional development and, particularly, the interaction between them. I want to find out more about the conditions necessary to achieve and anchor reflexivity and the potential benefits of following a self-reflexive process in research and practice. I begin by looking at my own journey of reflexivity, exploring the value of using life stories and poetry

as a part of this process, and then delve more deeply into the internal search of self through heuristic inquiry. [3]

2. Beginning the Journey

Reflexivity can be developed in various ways, but I focus here on the telling and sharing of personal life stories, poetry and dialogue as routes towards deepening the exploration and connection between personal discourses and professional lives. I do this because it is through an increased awareness of context and content in terms of one's own "lived experience" (through stories) that space is facilitated for a better understanding of one's own position within the complexities of society, in this case, my South African context (SLIEP & KOTZE, 2007). I begin here with a small piece of my story about my father, in poetry form, that reflects on my past and reveals the importance of acknowledging where I come from. I used poetry because creative means often facilitate uncovering lived experience and shared meanings. Expressive arts, such as poetry, can be used evocatively to develop and contextualize these meanings leading to layers of insight (GALLARDO, FURMAN & KULKARNI, 2009).

"Dad

I remember black and white photographs, dad with a big fish, dad and his bride
but he was all colour, red and fair
once a blistered boy, then a man of long socks and handkerchiefs;
sugar cane and litchi's; early morning fire and drought
dad was land, and dogs, family breakfasts, smell of bacon
he could divine water with a forked branch, nearly any old stick from the farm
not everyone knew this.

Then emphysema came, and dragged him gradually by his collar, up and up, every
step a cliff

and, unhurriedly, bit by bit caught each breath in a butterfly net
blew each one away, soft froths in the wind, which altered course, and left,
until there was hollow space around him and there was not enough air
left for him.

He waited for my sister to arrive, then slipped away, two days slow, to go
we sat with him, and as he left he passed to us, tiny trinkets in small cups
so now I hear his whistle singing in my son, my daughter plays with his fire
and much of me, is who he used to be.

And all that was left unsaid lies in wait, as his blessings come and go
puff, puff, puff on an oxygen pump." [4]

As researchers, I believe we can never be purely objective and we always carry our baggage (our "selves") into our work. This poem reveals the impact my father

had on my life, and the importance of exploring all the experiences and interactions that have shaped me. I explore my reflexive pathways through an autoethnographic study of my own experiences of sharing stories, sharing poetry and through dialogue. Autoethnography has been described as an analysis of personal experience which helps us better understand cultural experience, as something that a researcher does and writes about and, in this sense, is "both process and product" (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010, §1). This exploration is a product of a collaborative inquiry process that has been enriched and deepened by the reflexive dialogue that took place throughout the process with my academic supervisor. She has guided this process and her voice is a part of the poetry that follows. [5]

My experience of reflexivity is examined using a heuristic inquiry approach as developed by Clark MOUSTAKAS (1990). The process has been described as an attempt to discover the meaning and nature of phenomenon through internal pathways of self, using self-reflection and exploration of the nature of the phenomenon under study (DJURASKOVIC & ARTHUR, 2011). This approach is closely aligned with the process that developed naturally from following a reflexive process. As a result, to evaluate and record my journey using this framework has been, I believe, a meaningful exposé of myself, personally and as researcher. The process became an opportunity for me to critically consider my research aims and to question my own lens, how my own views may be influential on my research findings. In itself, heuristic inquiry is a reflexive process that involves transparency and honesty, with recognition for the subjective nature of research. I journey down these pathways because I want to *experience* what emerges when one engages reflexively with life story using poetry and dialogical reflexivity to enter deeper levels of consciousness. I want to connect with the bigger picture from multiple perspectives. In MASLOW's words, "there is no substitute for experience, none at all. All the other paraphernalia of communication and of knowledge—words, labels, concepts, symbols, theories, formulas, sciences—all are useful only because people already knew them experientially" (cited in MOUSTAKAS, 1990, p.17). Will this experience be an opportunity for me, as well as the other researchers and practitioners, to better conduct research or work with others, and if so, in what ways? [6]

3. Being Reflexive: Life Stories and Poetry

Life stories fall within the narrative research approach and are viewed in this article in terms of a social constructionist perspective, which recognizes knowledge is created in community, with others (GERGEN, 2009). While social constructionism generally is based on the view that we are intertwined with our social reality—each shaping and being shaped by the other—various orientations are possible within this approach (CUNLIFFE, 2008). In this article, I align with the idea of reality construction as a relational process. Our understanding of the world stems from our social interaction with each other ("selves-in-relation-to-others") rather than from a process of individual cognition (p.129). My attention turns to stories, poetry and dialogue, as all of these are shared conversations with and between the self and others, as ways of discovering and creating

meaning. Based on the assumption that our realities stem from interaction with each other, we need to be more reflexive about our own actions and understand that what we say will affect others. We need to be more reflexive and critical in challenging so-called essential truths as privileged by dominant discourses (SLIEP & KOTZE, 2007, p.140). [7]

Reflexivity itself has been defined in various ways but of relevance here and in line with the views above is a description of reflexivity as a "process of coming to an understanding of how one's actions are formed by and from the world and others" (GILBERT & SLIEP, 2009, p.468). The core of reflexivity then involves an ability to understand that reality is shaped over time, and that it is co-constructed communally (GERGEN, 2009). In relation to self-reflexivity, this involves understanding how we position ourselves and how our positioning is affected by dominant discourses. In acknowledging reflexivity itself as a relational process, it is viewed as occurring in context, as dynamic and iterative, influenced by our past and present social interaction with others and how we position ourselves in relationship (GILBERT & SLIEP, 2009). [8]

In telling our life stories, we are working with our lived experiences and linking our personal discourses to our professional lives and to society (SLIEP & KOTZE, 2007). Life stories are used to enable us to learn through our own experience which connects new knowledge to our own contexts (SLIEP, 2010). In this way, stories are viewed as tools for living that enable one to reflect and, therefore, to better understand, negotiate and create, leading to potential transformation on a personal and social level (SUAREZ-ORTEGA, 2013). Sharing stories becomes the basis for social dialogue between people in reflexive relationship, which includes movement from individual to shared meaning (BOHM, 1996). [9]

In my toolkit, alongside storytelling, I have added poetry both as a tool for digging and reflecting and as a form of presentation, building pictures of my experience. Poetry and poetic inquiry have been used in various ways in research, as a method for reporting research and as a tool for revealing deeper meaning (BRADY, 2009). It can be used as a way of tapping into the unconscious, both of the researcher and participants, and in the process, leads to greater insight (ROGERS, 1993) and depth of human experience (GALLARDO et al., 2009). We answer questions whereby we go beneath the surface; the experience is reflexive in nature and part of our storytelling process (BRADY, 2009). In contrast to the analytic scientific tradition, expressive arts research, including the use of poetry, specifically values subjectivity and aims to "expand and contextualise meanings" (GALLARDO et al., 2009, p.290). This is important in researching lived experience, and poetry is considered a particularly effective way of expressing and exploring this (GALLARDO et al., 2009; RICHARDSON, 1993). [10]

4. Telling My Own Story

Autoethnography is an approach involving the description and analysis of personal experience as a way of understanding cultural, social and political experience (ELLIS et al., 2010). Autoethnographies have been described as "written accounts about life experience of the person who is living and experiencing the researched phenomena" and as a means of permitting voice on issues founded on one's direct experiences (GALLARDO et al., 2009, p.288). The process is reflexive in nature. The researcher consciously immerses the self in relevant theory and practice to reveal an intimate and personal account of the phenomenon under investigation (MCILVEEN, 2008). I am looking at the process and product in full recognition that research is not neutral, objective or impersonal (ELLIS et al., 2010). It is the start of an exploration into different ways of knowing and requires not just the telling of a story but also an analysis of the experience in terms of theory, reflexive method and research literature. I hope to journey into a new form of knowing through reflexive practice, and I do this to add a layer of understanding to the experience of reflexivity for my future interaction with others. [11]

Autoethnography has various limitations and criticisms as a research method; an example of which is that autoethnographers are too absorbed in personal experience and that they use only their own biased data rather than being more involved in fieldwork. However, ELLIS et al. counter such arguments by contending that autoethnographers take a different view to research and that the most important questions to be considered here are "who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (§39). The focus of evocative autoethnography is on narrative accounts that involve emotional responses and open conversations. This aligns well with a critical, ideological paradigm as the role of power in shaping our realities is emphasized (MCILVEEN, 2008). This layer of research is intended to begin a process of facilitating my own critical consciousness and voice. It can be viewed as the start of a dialogue, which forms the basis of an inquiry into reflexive methodologies. [12]

5. Heuristic Inquiry

Clark MOUSTAKAS (1990) views heuristic research as a "process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis" (p.9). He believes this process to be essential for any type of investigation that involves the consideration of human experience. He believes this process of discovery can lead to new meanings and images of human experience, as well as realizations relevant to one's own experience and life. The value of the process lies in this two-fold effect of discovering the essential meanings of a particular experience and, at the same time, awakening and transforming the self. In this way, self-growth occurs as your self-understanding increases (ibid.). Learning emerges progressively and organically during the process of the inquiry. [13]

MOUSTAKAS (1990) is clear on what he terms an "unshakable connection" between what is outside, our context, and what is within a person in terms of

thought, awareness and feeling (p.12). Not only is the personal subjective nature of the researcher recognized, it is an essential part of the process. To be personally involved in the process enables the researcher to understand and see things in different ways, which, in turn, requires one to look to the self, recognize self-awareness and value own experience. Heuristic inquiry is an attempt to discover the meaning and essence of the phenomenon under study through self-reflection and self-discovery (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). It encourages a researcher to openly explore and follow an internal "creative path" so that one is able to find meaning from within (DJURASKOVIC & ARTHUR, 2011, p.1572). This requires an investigator to have a personal encounter with the experience being investigated, and it is in the telling of one's own story of the experience that leads to the possibility of personal transformation (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). Heuristic inquiry is, therefore, more than just a methodology; it can also be viewed as a process or skill, which involves an ability to sharpen one's perceptions, so that reflection then leads to the discovery of new insights and greater self-awareness (HILES, 2013). I have applied concepts from heuristic inquiry to my personal process so that I am better able to evaluate my experiences within the heuristic inquiry framework. I use the framework more to describe and further explore my experiences rather than as an original method of inquiry. [14]

6. Six Phases of Heuristic Research

With heuristic inquiry, I can explore reflexivity through six phases. I begin my journey (*initial engagement*) by investigating the question, "What emerges when you engage reflexively with your life story?" This is followed by an *immersion* in the topic and I am required to "live" the question, a period of *incubation* allowing for the inner workings of the tacit dimension to extend my understanding, which leads to *illumination* and the development of themes and a deeper awareness. The threads of my experience are drawn together in the *explication* phase resulting in a final *creative synthesis* illustrating a meaningful representation of my overall experience (DJURASKOVIC & ARTHUR, 2011; NUTTAL, 2006). I explore each phase through collaborative poetic inquiry and dialogue. [15]

6.1 Initial engagement

This initial phase involves the discovery of an intense interest in a phenomenon that has important personal implications for the researcher and social meaning. In this phase, I immerse myself in self-exploration to discover tacit knowledge, which leads to my research question (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). My engagement with reflexivity as a tool and a process of discovery began early in my master's degree during a teaching module, which used a life story methodology to explore the interaction between the personal and the professional (SLIEP, 2010; SLIEP & KOTZE, 2007). The experience of sharing my life story and witnessing the stories of others in the group was meaningful on a personal level, in reflecting on the self, and on a relational level. The social implications of this shared experience became evident as our stories unfolded, and we became shaped as a group. [16]

During the course, we shared information about ourselves using a "tree of life" metaphor looking at our historical roots, what has formed us, the fruits of our achievements on personal and professional levels, and our future hopes, the blossoms of our trees (ibid.). Drawing from this experience, my initial engagement involved looking closely at my ancestral roots, where I have come from. Of significance are the reflections within the story, the first being that I was almost given to another family after my birth at the hospital. I reflected on how environment can have influences on who you become. What if the baby swap had not been discovered, would I still be "me" if I had grown up in a completely different world? My journey of reflexivity began with that question through which I was able to look at my life more critically, my past, present, future and the different roles I have played. Who was I now and where was I going? These questions are embodied in the poem I wrote shortly after writing my life story, as a mature student, a mother of three children, returning to my studies, entitled "From Motherhood":

"I sit in my comfort, a tight-knit pit, hugging home, knees pulled in
yet crave, starve, arms stretch for more,
life spent, can't grieve, not so easy just to leave.
Ripples of a larger tide promise novel scent,
how far should I sniff beyond my own sleepy waters?
Doubt slides about, mistress of my mistiness, will not hide
despite her unrest and shallow disquiet,
more than daughter, mother, bride wife.
I will hitch up my skirt, once more, and stride
I must go further, or rust." [17]

This poem shows me that I want to be more than the roles society ascribes to me and pushes me to look more closely at the traditional roles that I have played, their construction in the South African context. I ask, "How can I go further, stand in my strength, and what responsibly will this bring?" Of particular interest in the phenomenon of reflexivity for me is the opportunity to develop and identify one's voice (the ability to question, to speak out, to share and tell) and the creation of critical voice, one that starts to question the truths that come from our stories. Experiencing my life story directed me, pushed me forward—mentally and physically—into action; I had to go further. I needed to journey into my own experience but with a view to engaging with the phenomenon more widely to consider its social implications in the following phases of my research. The poem was an unintended expression of my intentions, through which I was able to form my research question, "What is my experience of engaging in reflexivity through life story and poetic expression?" I needed to discover tacitly what was happening, what the experience meant to me. MOUSTAKAS (1990) describes tacit knowledge as a "capacity that allows one to sense the unity or wholeness of something from an understanding of the individual qualities or parts," and he describes how we can sense the "treeness of a tree" or its "wholeness" by having knowledge of all its parts and qualities. MOUSTAKAS notes further that "[t]his

knowing of the essence or treeness of a tree is achieved through a tacit process" (pp.20-21). Where did I want to go? What was holding me back? Would this process help me to find out? [18]

6.2 Immersion

In the second phase of inquiry, the researcher becomes one with the topic and must live the question. Living the question involves self-searching and following your intuition, listening to clues and hunches (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). MOUSTAKAS refers to this as getting "inside the question" through an immersion in the experience, which is open-ended and self-directed (p.15). In self-dialogue, the researcher converses with the phenomenon, "allowing the phenomenon to speak directly to one's own experience, to be questioned by it," so that multiple meanings can then be uncovered (p.16). The process involves not only the intellect but also emotion, with the researcher attempting to understand the phenomenon in its wholeness and unique patterns of experience (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). My self-dialogue, between a younger "she" and older "me," as a form of reflection was worked into a pantoum poem. This form of poetry is derived from Malayan poetry having patterns of repeated lines, which link new meanings back to what has been said earlier in the poem (SCHUSTER & COETZEE, 2014). I used this format to find the rhythm or essence of the dialogue, to enter a deeper understanding and to allow more questions and answers to emerge.

"Silence

It's me and she, we lived through different stories,
our words seem speechless, our silence untold, we hold it differently.
Her silence is a forest, she is held, cocooned,
my silence is an empty stone, it is cold.

Our words seem speechless, our silence untold, we hold it differently.
What about the whispers, stories round the fire?
My silence is an empty stone, it is cold.
Sad, strange silence, shall we crash and burn her down? Or make a hole?

What about the whispers, stories round the fire?
I want always to return, to lie in moss and mud.
Sad, strange silence, shall we crash and burn her down? Or make a hole?
It is my forest, stone may be cold but the trees embrace me.

I want always to return, to lie in moss and mud,
Her silence is a forest, she is held, cocooned,
It is my forest, stone may be cold but the trees embrace me.
It is me and she, we lived through different stories." [19]

Moving beyond self-dialogue and bringing in an outside voice, I probed what was beginning to emerge from the poetry: "What happens when you tell your story? And, what happens when you don't?" I found I needed to explore what the effect of telling my story had on me, and what my experience was of not telling parts of my story, my experience of silence. My relationship with reflexivity was under scrutiny and I was clinging to my silence in defense. I realized also there are (and will be) different perceptions of the same experience; it will never be seen and felt in the same way. With reflexivity especially, uniqueness disallows any simple answers, but it is still important to look and to interrogate the developmental stages you go through, to see how your story shapes you at different times of your life. Further, this exchange was not just about me. With witnessing the stories of others in the class, as we shared our stories together in a dialogical space, I was able to have a closer reflection on my own story as well. Listening to many difficult stories, from fellow South Africans and others from around the African continent, showed clearly how protected and privileged I have been and the importance of acknowledging this position, my struggles with white guilt, and the responsibilities attached to privilege. In turn, it shows the importance of not remaining silent, but of engaging in the conversation. [20]

6.3 Incubation

During incubation, the researcher moves away from the intense immersion with the question and becomes more detached from it. This period is a time for inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to work below the surface and to clarify understanding and perhaps, also to extend it beyond immediate awareness (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). Intuition has been described as the "bridge between the explicit and the tacit ... an internal capacity to make inferences and arrive at a knowledge of underlying structures or dynamics" (p.23). During this period of research, I moved away from the personal and the intensity of self-reflexivity to discover, in dialogue with my academic supervisor, as we worked together with poetry, the theory behind "reflexivity" as a psychological and social phenomenon. This put a distance between myself and the phenomenon, as I took a more objective stance, defining and breaking down the more theoretical aspects of reflexivity.

"Guiding Voice

Go to where the feelings are hidden, whisper deep inside
the place that does not judge so academically, seeking texture,
incubating heart and soul.

Searching and exploring, an adventurer peeping through the reeds
feeling, living, being in the unknown, walking in quicksand
nearly drowning, sinking deeper still, then letting go.

Writing without structure or rules, no tricky devices, some basic tools
experiential teacher looking quizzically at prose, guiding side by side,
tearing information into pieces, sewing back a tapestry of poetry." [21]

The poem depicts an important part of the process of reflexivity, a conversation through fertile ground that is adventuresome but at the same time, nonjudgmental, a time for growth. It is the dialogue that helps one see things from different angles, to seek new perspectives and to go beyond. My experience of reflexivity has not been a seamless journey and has involved much discomfort and feelings of anxiety. I have been "stuck" often and realize the need for support and dialogue to move forward. As reflexivity is co-constructed communally (GERGEN, 2009), we acknowledge the importance of relationship and despite this first phase of research focusing on my own story, my experience of reflexivity is relational. It involves (and cannot be separated from) my audience (students who were part of my master's class, who witnessed my life story and whose stories I witnessed) and ongoing dialogue with my supervisor. GILBERT and SLIEP (2009) discuss the process as dynamic and iterative, influenced by our interaction with others. In this way, my journey is shaped not just by my own self-reflection but also by a dynamic process of relation with others and in the context of my research. [22]

The process of my reflexivity since the initial life story work was continuous and involved a variety of methods that facilitate reflection including keeping reflective notes, free writing, poetry, reflective and ongoing dialogue, and doing collage work. I also attended and presented this work at the ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) 2015 conference on "Stories that make a difference" to learn more from the life history and biography network. This experience accentuated that learning comes from many places. This was an important part of the incubation process, learning more while allowing my inner knowledge to brood. [23]

VAN SCHALKWYK (2010), in support for her collage-life-story elicitation technique (a method for scaffolding life story remembering), discusses the importance of scaffolds and the use of different methods of expression (linguistic and nonlinguistic) in support of narrating life experiences. She describes scaffolding as "a system or process of supporting and/or priming life story remembering and narrative performance" and "a process of eliciting experiences from the past that have or could have significant meanings to the identity construction" (pp.676-677). The various methodologies explored add a different layer to my insight, a new perspective and are the scaffolds that support the development of a reflexive lens. Working reflexively is a dynamic process and requires embracing the possibility of multiple meanings. These do not emerge automatically; they are often hidden and need to be coaxed out. Through each exercise I made new connections, I started to tie the threads of my stories together, my personal and professional self, as reflexive researcher. With increased conscious awareness, this becomes known in the following phases. The poetry helps me to do this as thinking about it rationally gets me "stuck" on my defense mechanisms.

"new connections
charmed from the belly
shape me." [24]

6.4 Illumination

MOUSTAKAS (1990) explains this phase of inquiry as something that "unfolds" as the researcher becomes ever more open to the tacit dimension of intuition and knowledge. The researcher explores themes emerging into awareness that were not directly present as part of the researcher's consciousness and which reveal new insights. The themes that emerged for me begin with the need to acknowledge my ancestral background and the different roles I have played throughout my life, including the developmental stages I have been through and the shape these took. The unfolding begins as I start to identify my layers and tie together where the personal intercepts with the professional, adding in the political context as the lines between these layers start to blur. As I became more steeped in the experience of reflexivity, I found that the poetry I was writing was becoming more personal and I wrote a number of poems about my parents and growing up in South Africa. I felt the entanglement of the personal with the professional, the lack of separation between the two was emerging in my poetry. Rather than something realized theoretically, it revealed itself to me in my writing and focus. I was immersed in my own context and this was now becoming known. [25]

JONES (2005) emphasizes about performativity, your words not just as communication but rather as action in the construction of your identity, as an indicator that it is not possible to separate your life story from the contexts in which it is formed. Further, she says the various forms of personal narrative "enmesh the personal within the political and the political within the personal in ways that can, do and must matter" (p.774). My felt realization that this is the case—that "my" personal and "your" personal matters—is of significance in my professional work and my stance as a researcher, especially in working with life stories. I kept returning, more deeply, to my own story. Experiencing the telling of my story and witnessing the stories of others revealed unmistakably the significance of acknowledging your context and how this influences the way we view the world. This is evidenced in the poetry I wrote through the year on my roots, growing up white, in privilege, during the apartheid years in South Africa and in acknowledgment of the ongoing effect this still has on me:

"When I was growing—up apart
history twisted, her story skewed and shaped an other view
I want to vomit white guilt out, see this tree differently,
beauty unscarred
impossible" [26]

On my father who passed away from a long struggle with emphysema ("Dad")
and the silent strength of my mother, a survivor of breast cancer

"she never complained out loud
even when they cut
a hole in her chest
after all the veins
in her arms
had been
bled
dry" [27]

Generally, the process of placing your life in context and reflecting on your own and others' positions (past and present) is a time for us to question our thought processes and those of others around us. What did I take from the experiences of my father and mother, what parts of me are *who they used to be*? Such an investigation, in turn, facilitates an understanding of how our thoughts are shaped so we can move towards a position in which we become able to overcome what BOHM (1996) refers to as an essential difficulty: "that we automatically assume that our representations are *true pictures of reality*, rather than relative guides for action that are based on reflexive, unexamined memories" (p.xiii). What BOHM suggests is that we do not attempt to change the process of representation but that we become mindful of the fact that our representations, which we instinctively recognize as reality, may not be real or true. In this way, we engage in what he calls a form of "reflective intelligence" (ibid.). To take this further, I also need to question how this understanding (that my historical and contextual lens has shaped me, constructed my view of the world) will make a difference. Why is this important? How does it have impact on my research and on my profession? [28]

Considering my personal history and context more closely invites a process that leads to me troubling my position. Who am I to do the work and research that I want to do? What ethical dilemmas will arise as I start to question my position as an older, white woman working amongst youth from various race groups in a society that is still very marked by our apartheid history? I need to acknowledge not only the lens that shapes my thinking, but that I come from a position of not knowing. I believe this is where the value of listening to and witnessing the life stories of others lies. You listen because you do not know, and you listen because you understand that each person is the expert of his or her own life. With the process of exploring your own story, of being deeply reflexive, you are able to see the depths and uniqueness of your own internal pathways in such a way that it is impossible not to understand that you cannot know for another. If that is so, you cannot speak for another. How do I solve these dilemmas? [29]

6.5 Explication

The explication phase of inquiry involves a deeper examination of themes that have emerged and the researcher engages in focusing, indwelling, self-exploration, and self-disclosure. Indwelling refers to a process of turning inward to look for a deeper understanding of the experience and to "draw from them every possible nuance, texture, fact, and meaning" (MOUSTAKAS, 1990, p.24). The researcher starts to recognize the uniqueness of his or her own and others' experiences, and begins to build a more complete picture of the phenomenon (MOUSTAKAS, 1990). What is involved is an unfolding analysis to clarify meaning and expose new knowledge that has surfaced during the reflexive process. The importance of this phase is to go into detail, to closely examine what you are now becoming aware of, to understand each of the "various layers of meaning" (p.31). [30]

I was prompted to engage with nature, which surrounds my current living space, to let nature resonate the many experiences that the self-reflexivity was doing. It was time to engage more deeply with the themes that had become known, to feel and explore each layer and to grapple with these feelings. Here again, clarification came to me not just through an analysis of my own story but as part of the ongoing dialogue I was having with my academic supervisor. My learning was happening in conversation. This is illustrated in the following poems offering a dialogue beginning first with the voice of my supervisor, Yvonne SLIEP, and then followed by my own, and recognizing the importance not just of self-reflection but also of performativity, moving me towards an answer to the question posed above: Why are these understandings important?

"you find your essence
under the milkwood tree
connecting with earth
on a cellular basis
a bleeding tree
giving sacred status
milky latex laces
covering layers of white guilt
under the milkwood tree
you find your essence
can you move
from your position of complacency
where thinking is honoured
and feelings are covered
can you enter the night
make yourself big
knock on the chest

of the uniformed police
can you
can you use
use your knowledge
your position of privilege
use it to protect
can you?" (SLIEP) [31]

The focus of the poem is on how reflexivity can sharpen your vision and deepen your compassion and your knowledge, help you make a difference. In this way, reflexivity is viewed as going beyond a self-reflective process that is passive, to one that is active, dynamic and interactional. It challenges and probes. In answer, I become more aware of my self-doubt, where I am strong and where I am weak, what shapes me. My awareness is directional and my voice more critical. This is the experience of reflexivity in dialogue.

"I sit in shade, silent
under milkwood
beneath gnarled, sprawling branches
I want to remain
to lie in moss and mud.
It is my forest,
the trees embrace me.
I sit in shade
see new shapes,
old tides of experience
wash over
layer, upon layer.
Your words whisper
and I wish,
fiercely now
for knuckled fist.
I climb." [32]

From this poetic dialogue grew an increasing recognition of just how important it is to bring all the threads together and bring all of me into the picture. Such recognition is valuable not only in respect of making visible your subjective lens but also in your ability to make a difference. To make all the threads visible means you are able to look out for pitfalls, but you are also able to make full use of all your experiences and your resources. The positive aspects of your own power can be harnessed constructively rather than destructively. What has been asked of me is to enter my blind spots and particularly look more closely at my own relationship with power, my preference for steering away from confrontation

and not taking advantage of power that I do have, that could be used to help others more effectively, at higher levels. I see even more clearly, my personal intersecting with my professional choices, with which I can explore further options and possibilities. Twisting these threads together, my experience in law, education, research, as daughter, wife, mother—my life—I begin to see the whole tree and how this can shape my future professional work. [33]

With such wholeness, I am able to find answers I did not know I was looking for at the beginning of the process, how I can position myself in relation to my research, and how it may be just the possibility of making a difference that may be all that is needed to be able to move forward. Through further dialogue and poetry, I realized how easy it is to become stuck, so worried about doing the wrong thing, that I do nothing. The more I think with my head, rather than in my heart (with all of me), the more blocked I become and the less I actively do. My personal history is entwined with my professional decisions, which once recognized, I could explore possibilities for making decisions based on an active awareness of my positioning. Beyond being a researcher, I am also a trained attorney who has worked in commercial and community law. I work with street children, and my research has involved school projects and working with refugee youth, yet I contest my position, as a middle class white woman. Who am I to do this work? And yet, who am I not to? If not me then who, where do my responsibilities lie? *Wounded children ...*

"they are everywhere
in the neighbourhood
in schools
even on the streets
children with unheard needs
anger and fear follow them
like shades that trip and stab
what kind of world are we living in" (SLIEP) [34]

I sat in the park, doing a collage reflecting on this process and my research. I found a tulip in a dustbin, cut out yellow drops of rain, drew a tree and wrote the word "possibility." Collage, as an investigative tool, "allows the researcher to work in a non-linear and intuitive way by arranging image fragments that reveal unconscious connections and new understandings" (BUTLER-KISBER & POLDMA, 2010, p.2). BUTLER-KISBER and POLDMA (2010) explain how this process can add to the scaffolding of reflection by working from feelings first and then to thoughts, rather than the other way which is more common with written thoughts. In this way, it is possible for the collage artist to bring to the fore understandings and connections that previously remained hidden or part of tacit knowledge. I did not know at the time what connections I was making but on further reflection and in poetic dialogue; I realize we cannot ever know the result of an act we set into motion at a particular time. We may never know it, but it is possible that if space is created giving people an opportunity to share their life

stories that somewhere in the future, possibly, an event is described that creates conditions for the budding of a blossom that results in a fruit. I will not be able to do it all, but I can help facilitate the creation of healing spaces, building bridges through working collectively with others who bring different skills and knowledge. [35]

I know from this journey that I cannot know the lives of others; I am still learning my own. But it is through this knowledge, I think, that I am in a better position than I was before to go forward with my research. I have reaffirmed my belief in working through life stories and the need to follow a reflexive process, to come from a position of “not knowing” when I listen to the stories of others throughout my research. Overall, this journey has led me to believe in the possibility of growth and hope, and an acceptance of who I am and an awareness of the importance of being clear about my subjectivity. This is my insight.

"Yellow Rain

Face to face with my reflection

I question my belonging

Who am I to do this?

Who am I not to?

Face to face with my reflection

I question my belonging

I am me, I have myself to offer

I question my belonging

I can evaporate or stand

Who am I not to?

Live in the veins of others

I question my belonging

I am this moment

I have myself to offer

That is all I have to offer

I can evaporate or stand

I can open my arms

Live in the veins of others

I am yellow rain

I am this moment

I offer myself, as I am

That is all I have to offer

I can offer no more

I can open my arms

Who am I to do this?

I am yellow rain

I offer myself, as I am

I am me, I can offer no more
Face to face with my reflection" [36]

6.6 Creative synthesis

The final stage, if one can talk of such an organic process having a final stage, is an integration of the data and themes that have been discovered and are presented in a creative form like a narrative, poem, painting, or story. This is done "in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realized" (MOUSTAKAS, 1990, p.32). For me, this was the discovery of my understanding (my truth) as a concept that can be shaped and will be different for different people and for myself at different times. I started to intuitively feel and understand the dangers of searching for and asserting any kind of truth, and intuitively to embody the constructionist view that there is no single truth. GERGEN and GERGEN (2004) liken declaring the truth to setting language in a "deep freeze" and in that way, diminishing the potential for new meaning to develop. They contrast this to a constructionist view, which calls for open dialogue, "in which there is always room for another voice, another vision and revisions, and further expansion in the field of relationship" (p.25). [37]

Feeling reflexivity is the experience of theory through increased self-awareness, of understanding it experientially rather than theoretically. Reflexivity through life stories and poetry exposes the frailness of your truth. This process has also revealed the value of dialogue in the reflexive process, a conversation that takes you further than you can go on your own, asks you the questions that you may otherwise avoid, makes your search deeper. What emerges is awareness of the importance of speaking your truth and understanding that it is only your truth, the process shapes you.

"my
truth
dry clay
will crumble
in conversation
and a new truth will be moulded" [38]

The structure of this poem is based on the Fibonacci sequence, a number pattern referred to as the "Golden Ratio" and used in poetry to "mirror the growth pattern we so often see in nature" (SCHUSTER & COETZEE, 2014, p.86). I used this structure to bring my meanderings into sharp focus, to discover in process new truths. *If I tell you the truth, I will absorb you, no tiptoeing anymore.* [39]

7. Moving Forward

JONES (2005) asks us to see how we can use our words to make a difference and challenges us in our attempts at autoethnography to create work that is not just moving but that creates movement: work that encourages dialogue and debate about issues we consider significant to the world. It is in the embodiment of our work, the inclusion of ourselves and our emotions in our work, that the possibility arises for our words to be heard more meaningfully, and that as researchers and practitioners, we will be better able to understand our positioning and to work, non-judgmentally and with deeper understanding. MOUSTAKAS (1972) emphasizes,

"To know something from all levels, to experience the deepest truth concerning oneself and others, it is necessary to retreat within, to engage in a process of open inquiry and meditation that will reveal one's self to oneself. Only then is the person ready to act" (p.4). [40]

"Knowing" that is relationally responsive is linked to self-understanding and has been described as "relational and dialogic *implicit knowing from within*, situated in embedded and contextualized understanding" (CUNLIFFE, 2008, p.133). The implication is that our stories do matter, but more than this, it is also *how* we understand our own and others stories that will make a difference. [41]

Contextualized understanding can be a space for agency in which we are able to move forward with socially responsible choices in our lives. BANDURA (2006) views agency as an ability to intentionally influence your life circumstances and functioning. As such, it involves being proactive and reflexive, being more than just an "onlooker." This, in turn, involves recognition of the "duality between human agency and social structure," that as people we are not just products of our life circumstances, but that we are also contributors (p.164). In process, I have realized I could take all the parts of me, my whiteness, my femaleness, my education and experience to facilitate agency more effectively than when I hide, scared, behind stereotyped roles. [42]

I look back now to trace my agency, to see how it has been shaped through this process. I track agency by creating a "voice poem" or "I poem" using "I" phrases from my work, listed in order of appearance and presented as a poem. Researchers have used voice poems to listen closely to the research participant's first-person voice, to see how they talk about themselves, as a way of understanding the sense of self in terms of their values and the development of agency (GILLIGAN, 2015; KOELSCH, 2015). A pattern emerges as my personal agency strengthens, my voice first "found" then "used" more actively in my professional life, initially in the writing of this article and going forward with my research. I reflect now on the number of times I have returned to this process and the poetry, how you can know something but not believe it fully, how it is difficult to move forward, to become a contributor (an active agent). The poem below tells me that I have moved, that I have shifted my position.

"Looking for voice
I remember, I hear
I was growing
I look
I look
I want to
I can't
I choke (looking)
I sit, I sniff
I will
I must (deciding)
I want, I want
to coax her, hold her, cajole
her
create her
Voice
I sit (waiting)
I want
I wish (wishing)
I climb (starting off)
I question (questioning)
I have
I can (deciding)
I am
I am (finding)
I tell you
I will (using)
I am (found)" [43]

Embodied in these reflections of life story work is the narrative reflexive framework offered by SLIEP and NORTON (2016) who view the reflexive process as involving four iterative loops: deconstructing power; determining values and identity; negotiating agency and responsibility; and accountable performance. This is an iterative process at the center of which is the dialogical space where relational reflexivity is facilitated and around which the story or experience is developed. Working through these loops leads ultimately to living a preferred story, to action that is not just individually but also socially beneficial (ibid.). As

such, reflexivity is a process facilitating continuous and critical evaluation; helping us to move forward. In relation specifically to my reflections here, you gain strength through the process, not just a sense of agency but also the "doing" of agency, leading one towards relational performativity and future possibility.

"Together we build

possibilities

to respond

collectively

to create

the landscape

in which we want

to birth

our legacy" (extract from a poem by Yvonne SLIEP in SLIEP & NORTON, 2016, p.263). [44]

My exploration is ongoing and I am able, albeit tentatively, to move into the world and bring a deeper understanding to my research and work with others. I believe that such a reflexive process opens the way for conducting authentic and ethical research in terms of which there is a genuine belief in the value of listening to each other's stories. Because of the uniqueness of our stories, it is impossible to understand someone fully without in some way walking in their shoes (understanding context). In relation to research, this is important as I believe that studies not contextually based, that do not take into account the story behind, cannot get to the heart of the issue being investigated. A researcher who claims objectivity is working under false pretenses. It is imperative to be open and honest so that our biases (and we all have them) can be taken into account. In a professional context, for example, in health promotion, the same holds true. We need to approach others from a position of "unknowing," truly believing they are the experts in their own lives. For example, my research with refugee youth from the Democratic Republic of the Congo living in South Africa means I have to challenge my position. How can I ever begin to understand their experiences, hopes and dreams? I cannot, unless I am open to listen and to learn, and I cannot speak on their behalf. (Who am I to do that?) What I can do though is to facilitate spaces for these youth to grow their own knowledge—to understand how power operates in their lives, to discover their own identities and values and to develop their own agency and voice. [45]

My experience teaches me more about the importance of engaging in a dialogical space(s), what this really means and the methodology that makes this work. This space needs to be one of trust and non-judgment, where someone is encouraged to self-explore (to go within) and to connect to others, and to the environment (our whole context). It is a space where the heart matters and where personal stories matter, where we begin to see how the stories have impact on our practice. True knowing, I believe, can never be purely academic—our personal and professional paths crisscross. Our scaffolds of discovery are built from within

and with others—through stories, poetry and other creative ways that allow for the budding of our intuition and tap into our indigenous knowledge. It is our awareness of how our personal informs our professional that will facilitate better outcomes for those with whom we work. In these ways, we are able create a critically reflexive lens through which to view the world. [46]

Experiencing my reflexive journey and writing this article has been bumpy—long and slow. I have revisited different parts of my story and different phases of reflection many times and along the way have made many new discoveries. Retrospectively, I have found that the true value lies in the time that the process has taken, how awareness evolves with more clarity through dialogue, including feedback from the reviewers of this article who then also became part of the reflexive process. In the end, I realize, it is not about just understanding reflexivity as a concept; it is about experiencing it, engaging with it and developing a continual practice of reflexivity. It is about learning tools to enable us to remain reflexive, whether in our research or practice. There are no short cuts and reflexivity requires ongoing commitment. We need to become lifelong learners, faithful to reflexive engagement (SLIEP, 2010). This changes the way I will look at my future research and practice. Critical learning spaces need to be created for the active exchange of ideas in dialogue, revisiting awareness and building in time for anchoring reflexivity, not as something to be done, but as something that becomes a part of the way you do things (the way you research or the way you approach your profession). We need to keep the conversation alive to understand dialogue as a practice that is socially situated and, therefore, dynamic so that we are better able to link our reflexive practices to a transformative agenda (RULE, 2004). [47]

In my ongoing research and in my continued unfolding as a professional, I hope to facilitate spaces that will enable others to tell and share stories through which they are, in turn, able to move in directions of their own choosing. As social constructionism calls for a "radical pluralism" which is open to many truths and respect for all others regardless of their traditions; the challenge then becomes not to find "the one best way" but to facilitate the building of collaborative relationships for working together towards a better future (GERGEN & GERGEN, 2004, pp.20-21). This is further advocated by PILLAY (2009) who believes that the discovery of the "self" is of great social value, "because it is not a constructed identity that lives within the shadow of fear" and that "the challenge is to discover for ourselves the movement of action that is not about 'me' but about 'us'" (p.233). As the conversation unfolds, I cannot hide, I will move forward, I will not rust.

"in dark spaces

little moist

new life sprouts

in tangled mess

of life and death

the forest grows" [48]

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